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ABSTRACT

The use of context clues is basic to the reading act. This paper emphasizes the importance of teaching students to recognize context clues and outlines reasons for teachers' frequent failure to do so. It then suggests ways of helping students become aware of ways context clues can be of value to them as readers and of teaching them to identify different types of context clues, such as those that provide a direct definition of an unknown word or a comparison with it. Teaching strategies are then suggested for introducing the concept of context and helping students learn how to use context to determine word meaning. Finally, the paper shows who to design lessons based on the cloze procedure, context response cards, and "super sleuth" cards as practice exercises in using context clues. (GW)

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# TEACHING STUDENTS TO USE CONTEXT CLUES IN READING

by Nancy G. Whisler

Peripatetic - How many persons recognize the meaning of this word as it appears above in isolation? "His brother was married, had a secure job, and was beginning to establish roots in Salem; whereas Sam was still clinging to his peripatetic lifestyle." Again this same word is used; this time, however, the meaning is easily determined (vagrant, wandering, roving) through the use of semantic strategies which are more commonly referred to as context clues. Context clues then, are bits of information gained by the reader from the sense of the surrounding words, sentences, and language patterns that are sufficient to bring meaning to an unknown word.

The importance of the relationship of context clues to the reading act is well documented in research studies and most all texts on reading instruction. Both reading authorities and linguists agree that the use of context clues is one of the more important determinants in word recognition and meaning for both beginning, and more importantly, mature readers. Ubiquitous statements are found that advocate direct instruction in the use of context clues as part of the basic developmental reading program.

Of all the word recognition techniques that students are taught

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to use (phonetic and structural analysis, sight vocabulary, and the dictionary) probably the least amount of instructional time is spent on context clues. This may occur for several reasons: There is no set body of information or acquired skills which if one possesses, can lead to the definite analysis of a word. This is unlike combining beginning consonant, medial vowel, and final consonant sounds; using knowledge of inflected word forms, or applying dictionary skills to determine a word and its meaning. The number of possible sentences is infinite and the uses of context change with each different textual situation. Possibly the major cause of this dearth of teaching is that teachers seem to have a meager knowledge of how to teach students to use context, where to start, and what steps are involved. This deficiency can lead to an insecurity and subsequent total avoidance of instruction in the use of context altogether. This, unfortunately is the frequently prevailing situation in many classrooms.

A program ofcontext clue instruction included sequential teaching, continuous attention, and systematic guidance. The first step is to have students aware of context clues and how they can be of value to them as readers. Knowing the practicality of and why they are being taught the concept of context can serve as a motivational factor in encouraging proficiency in the use of meaning to determine unfamiliar words. When students realize that using context can help them in school reading situations and also lead to more independence in reading outside school, the interest in learning this skill is greater. To get maximum assistance from context clues, the next step is to become familiar with and recognize the different types of context clues. Finally, varied practice in using the different types of context clues should improve this skill so that it becomes a functional tool to help increase total reading

ability.

## Becoming Aware of Context Clues

More important than professional sounding testimonial statements as to the importance of context clues, is to begin to familiarize students with the kinds of situations where using meaning clues can assist them in reading.

1. Context clues can help students remember words they have learned earlier but may have forgotten. A partially-learned word in a new context may present temporary difficulty to a student. Jan reads "Bill want to the store." for "Bill went to the store." If the student learns to ask himself if what he read makes sense, he is often able to correct himself.
2. Context clues may be combined with other word analysis clues to check the accuracy of a word identified by another clue. Jan incorrectly reads "Mark put money in the band." By checking to see if the word band, which was determined by phonetic analysis makes sense, Jan sees that bank is more appropriate.
3. Context clues are an additional and more rapid technique than other word analysis strategies to help determine word meaning. Students learn the value of selecting means which are correct both semantically (meaningfully) and syntactically (grammatically). Taking advantage of experiences and language patterns helps the student anticipate, predict, and infer what an unknown word might mean.
4. Frequently context clues are required to determine the correct meaning of a word where several meanings

are possible. In the example "It was difficult to climb up the steep bank of the river." Jan reads the word bank and can determine which meaning to use because the context helped.

5. Context is also required to determine the correct pronunciation and subsequent meaning of heteronyms: lead(lēd)-lead(led) project(proj' ekt)-(prə jekt')

Identifying Different Types of Context Clues

For the student to get the greatest service from context, he needs to be familiar with how the different types of context clues bring meaning to unknown words. Thus, there is a need for some sort of taxonomy of context clues. The main purpose in using a classification system at all is for specificity in describing the different types for subsequent instructional purposes. Harris and Smith (4) indicate that as students progress through the grades they should be taught to identify the different types of context clues. This does not mean that students necessarily need to be burdened with learning the technical names used to describe the clues, but rather that they are given opportunities to identify probable meanings in which each type of clue is used. The classification system suggested by Strang, McCullough and Traxler (8) seems to be inclusive and is described here.

1. Background Experience - In this clue preexisting knowledge, experience, or a familiar language pattern sheds light on the meaning of an unknown word. "Tod was thrilled as he stood on the pier and reeled in a beautiful thirteen-inch oquessa which was wriggling on his line."

2. Direct Explanation or Definition - The unknown word is defined, explained or described by the sentence in which the word appears. "The announcer displayed androgynous traits, in that he showed both male and female gestures and characteristics."
3. Reflection of a Mood or Situation - The meaning of the unknown word may be implied from the tone of visualization of the circumstance. "Two of the three children already had avitaminosis. This was probably due to the fact that for months they hadn't been well fed. In spite of having enough food, they just weren't getting the proper diet. They caught colds easily, weren't alert in school, and in general displayed a lack of interest and energy."
4. Synonym or Restatement - This clue occurs when the sentence calls for a repetition of the same word and a synonym or appositive is used instead. "Jane considered her friend's problem a bagatelle, a mere trifle."
5. Comparison and Contrast - Words in the sentence that compare or contrast with the clue. "John's feeling about the decision remained arcane, whereas Polly was overt about her opinion."
6. Summary - In this clue, the unknown word is a summary of the ideas presented previously. "Prior to her diet, Sue was always hungry, ate continually, and was never full or satisfied that she'd eaten enough. She had bulimia."

Quite often a combination of two or more clues is apparent in facilitating the recognition of a strange word. Frequently also, a context clue cannot be clearly classified as one type or another. In some textual situations there are no context clues at all, and in these instances the reader cannot depend on our use meaning as a word recognition strategy. Whether a clue is designated as one type or another or a combination of types is debatable and also unimportant. Most paramount is the ability to use the kind of information presented by the various clues to determine meaning.

## Teaching Strategies

Too often instruction in the use of context clues consists of merely telling students that sometimes in their reading, they will encounter words with unfamiliar meanings and when this happens they should use the sense of the other words to try to decide what they mean. Nor is it adequate to expect students to learn to use context clues on their own or to leave the acquisition of this skill to exiguous or incidental teaching. Not only the teachers who are responsible for developmental reading instruction, but also those concerned with the content area instruction, need to promote the use of meaning clues through direct systematic teaching.

Even at the beginning stages of reading instruction, teachers can follow some of these guidelines which are geared toward assisting students to effectively use contextual aids.

The concept of context can be introduced initially in oral lessons that include helping the student develop an understanding of what is meant by using context. Students need to know that all words need to make sense in a sentence. To illustrate this, the teacher

may give examples of sentences that contain words that are not meaningful in that context.

During story time the teacher can stop and ask "What word do you think will come next? What words could make sense?" The same thing can be done with simple sentences on the board.

It may be pointed out to the students that they can determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word by looking at the surrounding text for clues. In a group discussion the teacher may do several examples with students in which they are asked to point out the helpful parts they depend on to get the meaning. Students may be asked, "What words in the sentence gave you a hint of the meaning?" Students may explain how and why they made this decision. It should be stressed that determining meanings in this way can often be done independently.

At this point students may be helped to understand that the use of context can extend beyond the sentence in which the unknown word appears. If necessary, students may be encouraged to read beyond the unfamiliar word and look at the rest of the sentence or paragraph prior to trying to decide on a meaning. Research has indicated that the words that follow a strange word are more helpful to derive its meaning than those that preceed it.(7)

A number of examples of each type of context clue may be presented in the manner suggested above. Students may choose which type of clue was used. Opinion varies about how precise the naming needs to be or even if it is essential. The main point here is that for most readers, some kind of classifying appears to be helpful.

Students may be directed to check the accuracy of their "contextual guesses" by using the other word analysis techniques. They should continually be encouraged to employ a combination of strategies as they tentatively identify words. Meaning clues alone frequently are not enough.

Practice Exercises to Develop The Use of Context Clues

When developing worthwhile lessons and practice materials to help students learn to use context clues, it is helpful to be aware of several guidelines. Presenting this new skill should be done while employing familiar vocabulary. All the words in the lesson, with the exception of the target words, should be known to the student in form, pronunciation and meaning. The ratio of unknown words (those on which the student is expected to make use of context) to known words should not be greater than 1 in 40.(3) If a longer selection is used, the unknown words should be equally distributed throughout the selection. Care should be taken to make sure the content of the practice material gives adequate clues to meaning. Subject area texts are a better source of materials containing words which can be explained by context than are the basal readers containing typical narrative. At first, exercises should contain clear cut examples of a single type of context clue, then gradually several types may be combined.(7) Eventually instruction should also include examples where the use of context offers no help with meaning, for to avoid them is to avoid reality.

Several practice exercises are described here to help students identify and use contex clues in their reading.

Cloze Lessons - The Cloze Procedure is one method for developing the

use of context as well as comprehension. Leaving the first sentence intact, words at regular intervals i.e., every 7th word, are deleted from the selection and are replaced by a standard 15-space blank.(6)

> "Aunt Thelma helped measure the boys for baseball uniforms and I helped give them out. Sidney cried when he found _____ that he wouldn't have his _____ pants right away. His mother _____ to Aunt Thelma that he _____ a little overweight. Actually, Sidney _____ fat. His pants would have _____ be ordered.

An interesting and easy way to prepare cloze lessons at the student's instructional level is to use the actual texts or discarded readers at the same level. The book is cut into units, chapters, or more preferably stories, and the pages stapled together to form a mini-book. With a black felt tip marking pen words at the selected level are covered. It is suggested to delete every 5th to 7th word in narrative materials, and every 8th to 10th word in expository materials. Another copy of the same text may be used as the answer sheet so students may check their own responses.

Context Response Cards - On tagboard strips the teacher prepares a series of sentences such as the following where context can be the determinant of the unknown word meaning.

> Their shoes felt sabulous after the long hike on the beach.
> dirty polished sandy soft new

> He had always been interested in and had a natural proclivity towards medicine as a career.
> dislike hesitancy happiness inclination sickness

As the teacher holds up each card, a whole group of students can respond at one time. Each one writes the word he/she thinks best

gives the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

Super Sleuth - The students are the detectives. The teacher develops a number of "cases" similar to the following by writing or gluing paragraphs each with an unfamiliar word on 3 x 5 inch cards.

sample case cards →

Case 3

Brando refused to emerge from the seclusion of his luxurious motor home until director Arthur Penn had entered into a "discussion period" with him about his character—an eccentric hired gun contracted by a local rancher to wipe out a band of rustlers. The heated colloquy lasted four hours while the production stood still, potentially costing the $8 million project delay charges estimated at $186,000.

Case 5

For starlets who survive the prurient perils of the casting call, the auditions, the improvisations and the rehearsals, there's always lust on location to contend with. "After you get the job, it's fair game," reports Susan Clark. Despite complaints about its torpor, SAG is not deaf to such dilemmas; recently officials announced that a policewoman may be hired to teach the latest techniques in self-defense.

The case cards may be spread out on desks. The directions to the students are: "You are to solve as many cases as you can. Read each paragraph. Decide which kind of context clue (experience, definition, reflection of a mood or situation, synonyms, comparison or contrast, or summary) you used to determine the unknown word meaning. Then write the type of clue next to the case number on your evidence sheet. You may solve the cases in any order."

## Summary

Perquisite - The perquisite students derive from effectively being able to use context clues may well be a facilitating factor bringing them closer to the goals of reading instruction, namely reading independently and for enjoyment. It seems consistent with these goals then to recommend the establishment of a systematic program of context clue instruction and practice where this skill of deriving meaning of unknown words can be developed. When used in conjunction with other word recognition techniques, readers will then be able to encounter the printed page with more confidence and success.

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